



**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)**

Hearing on “Seeking Justice and Freedom in Belarus”

Tuesday, September 21, 2021

2:30 p.m.

Room 419, Dirksen Senate Office Building

Opening Statement of Helsinki Commission Co-Chairman Rep. Steve Cohen

Thank you to Chairman Cardin, the Helsinki Commission and our witnesses for holding this important hearing on concerning developments in Belarus. Belarus is on the edge of Russia, and that is very dangerous. Similar to the recent Russian Duma election, Belarus’ 2020 presidential election was filled with widespread fraud. After this sham election, Belarusians took to the streets in peaceful protests calling for Alexander Lukashenko’s resignation. These protests were met with unprecedented violence by Belarusian authorities. Since the August 2020 election, more than 35,000 peaceful protesters have been detained.

I have met Lukashenko on two different occasions, and he is the epitome of an autocrat. He likes power and has no desire to turn any of it over. While in Belarus, I met with multiple NGOs, journalists, and citizen groups who all expressed fear about what Lukashenko was doing to their elections. Just as he has done in the past, in the 2020 election, Lukashenko arrested political opponents and won with absurdly high margins, no doubt the result of voter fraud.

We must respect all freedoms including freedom of speech, association, and press. Independent journalism continues to be under attack in Belarus. There have been at least 580 instances of arbitrary detentions of journalists since August 2020 and at least 29 journalists are



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currently in jail. And who could forget the infamous grounding of a commercial flight to arrest journalist Raman Pratasevich and his girlfriend back in May. I continue to join Senator Cardin and the Helsinki Commission on efforts to call out violations of these basic human freedoms whenever they occur.

This week, Ranking Member Joe Wilson and I plan to introduce a resolution denouncing these and other concerning acts by Lukashenko's government, and expressing our continued solidarity with the people of Belarus. Our resolution recognizes the ongoing crackdown on important freedoms in Belarus and calls for an end to President Lukashenko's continued repression of peaceful protesters, journalists, human rights defenders, political activists, and others. The trends present in Belarus are beyond concerning, and I'm glad that we are having this hearing today to shed more light on injustices suffered by the Belarusian people under Lukashenko's regime.

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." I, along with the entire Commission, am committed to supporting freedom and human rights in Belarus, and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.